

The Excess of Teaching: On the Decency of the Supplement and the Indecency of the Event

Claudia W. Ruitenberg
University of British Columbia

“Joy and love, and unbent freedom are in me linked to the hatred of satisfaction.”

— George Bataille, “Friendship”

John Caputo has given us a meditation on the significance of the gift and the event in education. It is a timely reminder that what appears to run counter to systems, programs, and economies of education — such as the gift — may actually be required to keep these systems, programs, and economies livable. In my comments I would like to trouble the connection Caputo has made between the gift and the event. I will argue that, while some gifts occasion an event, gifts need not be evental, nor are all events occasioned by a gift

Teachers in my home province of British Columbia have been involved in a labor dispute for months. They have taught what their employment contract requires of them, but have refused extracurricular activities, field trips, even report cards. Caputo understands that if teachers “work the contract, the contract will not work.” That is, if teachers withhold the gift they have come to be expected to give, that of which the gift was supposed to be in excess is shown to be lacking. This teachers’ gift, then, works through the logic of the supplement, the paradoxical addition that is not merely an addition. As Derrida explains, “the supplement ... adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void.”¹ Teachers give gifts of time and money every day as they give up their lunch hours to spend extra time with students, or as they pay out of pocket for classroom materials, snacks, even extra underwear for kids who have an “accident” at school. Such gifts are in addition to what teachers are required to do, but they are supplementary additions, as education is perceived to be impoverished when these supplements are removed.

Cheshire Calhoun, who contributed the Kneller essay to the 2002 volume of *Philosophy of Education*, explains this very well in her analysis of the moral status of common decency. She notes that acts that are considered supererogatory moral acts for most other people and in most other professions come to be expected as acts of common decency in the “helping professions” such as nursing, social work, and teaching. Calhoun observes: “Teachers are expected to do as a matter of common decency what in other occupations would seem noteworthy generosity — for example using one’s own funds to provide client services, routinely coming in before the workday begins, staying after hours, working weekends, and not striking.”² The catch is that one can withhold supererogatory acts without being found morally lacking — if one withholds such supererogatory acts one is simply a regular person rather than a moral hero — but it does not work the same way with acts of common decency. As Calhoun explains, “common decencies are not fully morally

elective,” and someone who withholds a moral gift that has come to be expected is vulnerable “to the charge of being petty, mean-spirited, contemptible, disappointing, irritating, and a poor excuse for a moral agent.”³

So Caputo is right when he states, “Absent the gift, the school would be an impossible place to be. The innumerable, invisible, ghostly gifts the teachers make are all gratuitous, extra, in excess of the economy, yet they are all absolutely necessary.” However, not all gifts are eventual. When teachers give in excess of their duties, such gifts may function as supplements that may or may not turn out to be eventual. The supplementary nature of a teacherly act does not make it more or less likely to inaugurate an event. The event of teaching may occur in or as a result of acts that can fall both within and outside of the expectations of the job. Teachers engaged in a labor dispute who withhold the supplement of teaching may still bring about an event in the scene of pedagogy.

“The event arrives like the possibility of the impossible, of the unforeseeable, of some invisible spirit in which we did not previously believe,” writes Caputo. The arrival of the event is memorable, and I certainly remember scenes of pedagogy where an event arrived. The scene of my high school mathematics classroom where Mr. Freye, a mysterious man with little round glasses, a stern three-piece charcoal grey suit, and impish pink socks, taught about symmetry and asymmetry not through the standard manipulatives and illustrations, but through pictures of the façade of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. With twinkling eyes Mr. Freye brought the promise of aesthetics into the realm of mathematics, thus “letting the event by which the teacher is touched touch the student, so that both the teacher and the student are touched by a common event,” as Caputo writes. Or the scene in an undergraduate arts course, the name of which I have forgotten, which asked us to write a review of a performance of *Tiger Lily*, a choreography by Jiří Kylián. My teacher Marianne Lindhout could not have foreseen or in any way planned that I, who knew nothing about dance, would be so physically shaken by this performance that I could not speak. The performance arrived as an event, made me subject to it, and allowed me to experience how I could learn from that which I could not cognitively understand. Borrowing Caputo’s words I would say that my teacher allowed the event to happen without standing between me and the event, and that she had figured out how to be “an agent without agency, a provocateur who is not an agent.”

When this event arrived my teacher was nowhere to be seen, seated elsewhere in the dark theater, but she might even have been absent altogether, as a pedagogical event can arrive in the absence of the teacher. Such an event occurred during the first year of my PhD studies, when I read the introductory chapter of John Caputo’s *More Radical Hermeneutics*. Convinced of the existential necessity of sense-making, but exasperated by the religious foundations holding up the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor, I received Caputo’s gift of a bold, agnostic hermeneutics:

We are driven by the passion of non-knowing. Our readings and interpretations, our rereadings and conflicting interpretations, are like so many fingers clinging tenaciously to the edge of the cliff. Instead of arresting the play of meaning, a more radical or more originary

experience of hermeneutics faces up to the inescapable play of interpretation, which is all we have to hang on to as our feet dangle dangerously over the rushing rapids below.⁴

I remember, in the first instance, not thought but a rush of blood and adrenaline in response to this relentless hermeneutics that stared our non-knowing in the face without escape into transcendental certainty. As Caputo reminds us, “the event is not only cognitive light and not primarily something cognitive.... [I]t calls and solicits me, so that it has a ‘vocational’ force, provoking me, evoking my response, transforming my life.”

Perhaps Caputo wrote this work with the deliberate intention of giving a pedagogical gift to beginning scholarly readers, or perhaps he wrote it primarily to continue a conversation with philosophical colleagues, or even to fulfill the requirements of research output in the academic economy — my point is, it does not matter, for the educational event cannot be planned or scheduled, and can arrive no matter what the intentions of the teacher, and no matter whether that teacher is present in or absent from the scene of pedagogy in which the event arrives.

It was Jacques Derrida who called our attention to the emphasis on presence in, for example, the privileging of speech over writing.⁵ It could be said that the event that was occasioned by *More Radical Hermeneutics* was an event occasioned by a text, not by a teacher, but Derrida called into question precisely the assumption that absence marks only writing, not speech. The teacher need not be present — not physically present, or present in intention or consciousness — in the scene of pedagogy in which an event arrives.

In my final section, and inspired by my rereading of *More Radical Hermeneutics*, let me push Caputo’s point that “the school is the place where, in an effort to let the event happen, we reserve the right to ask any question.” This is an argument for educational excess not in the form of the supplementary gift of teaching, but in the form of an unconditional respect for thinking and questioning. It is an argument for *indecent* education, but education that breaks the expectation of decency not by withholding the common decency of supplementary work. This education is indecent and excessive because it asks importunate questions, and especially because it dares to listen and make space for the importunate questions students raise — questions such as what happens when we die, whether God is real, why this person is sleeping in a cardboard box. It carries beyond the scope of teachers’ individual employment contracts to ask such difficult questions to which we humans have provided rather inadequate answers. Arguably it also carries beyond the scope of schools’ curricular contracts with the provincial, state, or national governments, and some might even say it carries beyond the social contract of public education in liberal democracies more generally. However, I agree with Caputo that questions to which there are unsettling answers, or to which the answer is that we do not know, or to which some give answers that disagree with other answers, that those are the excessive questions that should not be relegated to the private sphere of the home — where they may be rekindled as well as extinguished — but that should “hound and harass” the programs of education.⁶

Such an indecent, excessive education that conjures events is demanding and even risks becoming a new program, a new dogma. For the right to ask any question to be a gift, it must be offered as gift, not as force or insistence. However, as Caputo has pointed out, “as soon as the gift is given the gift begins to annul itself, to establish an economy in which the one to whom the gift is given incurs a debt, an obligation, which will impel him or her to find some way to repay this gift and discharge this debt.” The teacher who creates an educational space in which any question can be asked may be faced with a student anxious about the perceived obligation to ask importunate questions. So to accompany the excess of unconditional questioning another excess or gift is needed: one that tends to the affect — whether joy, anger, fear, or sadness — generated by such questioning, or the sheer possibility of such questioning. The scene of pedagogy, then, can be marked not only by the gift of the right to ask any question, but also by compassion and forgiveness when this gift is refused or ignored.

1. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 145, emphasis in original.

2. Cheshire Calhoun, “Expecting Common Decency,” in *Philosophy of Education 2002*, ed. Scott Fletcher (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003), 32.

3. *Ibid.*, 27.

4. John Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 3.

5. Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” in *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

6. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 2.